

May 10, 2020 ~ 1Thessalonians 4:1-8, Living Apart from Pagan Culture

Last week we studied the last part of chapter 3, where Paul was praying to God while writing to the believers in Thessalonica: he wanted to go to them, to see them face to face, and to encourage them to continue increasing in their love for one another and for all people.

In today's passage, Paul begins by encouraging the believers to continue to grow in their knowledge and expression of Christ, i.e., to live in such a manner as to please God.

Read 1Thessalonians 4:1-2... Paul exhorts the believers to continue in their faith and practice, increasing in their Christlikeness; even though he has already commended them for their life and witness (see **1Thessalonians 1:2-3, 6-7**).

Notice that Paul doesn't "command" them, but instead requests and urges them not to be content with where they are spiritually, as if they had attained a level of completion, but instead to seek to all the more continue to grow and live in a way that pleases God.

Spiritual growth is indeed a process, just as physical growth and learned knowledge is a process. Paul desires that all believers make their life in Christ a lifelong commitment to growing in the knowledge and expression of God's Word.

The desired result for which Paul strongly urges the believers in Thessalonica, is a life of holiness, one that is more representative of God than godless mankind.

Read 1Thessalonians 4:3-5... God's desire is that as Christians, we are to remain set apart from the world and culture around us that is not pleasing to God. Clearly, we are not to participate in or condone sexual immorality; but instead, we are to live in a manner that is reflective of the salvation we have received.

Thessalonica was part of the Greco-Roman culture, and was noted for allowing a wide chasm of sexual indulgences and erotic perversions. So, for new believers, who had grown up in the pagan society of Thessalonica, apart from any Christian tradition or influence upon the standards and practices of their culture, they didn't necessarily consider fornication and adultery to be immoral; in fact it was most likely that sexual immorality was more tolerated in Thessalonica than in our present culture in America, which is hard to imagine.

The world today is intoxicated with sex that is displayed in a variety of godless ways and relationships. By biblical definition, sexual immorality is any sexual behavior and/or thinking that is outside of what God has clearly ordained to be part of the marriage relationship, i.e., one man and one woman, in a monogamous relationship, committed to God and to each other.

Hebrews 13:4, "Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge." Fornication is any sexual relationship that occurs outside of a marriage; adultery is any sexual relationship between a married person and someone other than their spouse.

God declares His judgement on all forms of sexual immorality, and those who live in such a way condemn themselves to be outside of God's grace.

1Corinthians 6:9-11, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."

Half of that list of destructive lifestyles have to do with sexual immorality. These aren't just sinful acts (we are all sinners and we sin), but these are lifestyles that dominate unregenerate people; those who live this way will not go to heaven.

As believers and followers of Christ, we are not to live like pagans who do not know or belong to God. Instead, we are to dedicate our body, soul, mind, and spirit to God, who has mercifully granted us forgiveness and eternal life through Christ.

Romans 12:1-2, "...I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Read 1Thessalonians 4:6... This is indeed, at first read, ambiguous, for Paul has been talking about sexual immorality, and now he tells the believers they are not to transgress [*sin against*] or defraud [*take advantage of*] another believer [in this context it is talking about sexual sin]. This seems to imply a situation where a believer seeks to fulfill their own desires or to gain some sexual benefit at the expense of another person. What does that mean? Let's look at a few passages: **1Corinthians 5:1-2**, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst." **9-13**, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves."

The church in Corinth was allowing a man to commit adultery with his step-mother, Paul commands that he be removed from the body of believers (until he repents or comes to faith in Christ) Paul calls him a "so-called" brother.

Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." **28-33**, "So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband."

Neither a husband nor a wife should misuse their sexual relationship, i.e., neither or them should seek gratification only for themselves, as if the other person is there just to fulfill their needs, for that is taking advantage of them. Biblically, the husband is to set an example by the way he loves his wife and puts her first.

We also see this standard evidenced in God's ordained qualifications for those who would servant-lead the church of God (Pastor-Elder-Overseer). In **Timothy 3:2**, it declares that, "An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife." The phrase translated "husband of one wife" from the Greek, is more correctly rendered, "a one-woman man," i.e., he only has eyes for his own wife, if he is married; if he isn't married, he doesn't have lustful wandering eyes, but treats sisters in Christ with respect and chivalry.

1Peter 3:7, "husbands... live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker [the weaker vessel], since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered."

If a husband doesn't hold his wife in high esteem, or treat her with respect and devotion, his prayers will be hindered, because to treat her any other way is sin.

Men and women must respect the differences between genders, but we must never use those differences to take advantage of another person.

Genesis 1:27, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." **Genesis 2:7**, "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." **18**, "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'" **22-24**, "The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."

God made men to be stronger than women — physically, emotionally, and constitutionally — for it was God's plan that men, as husbands, would have the responsibility to protect and provide for their wife, and to lead their families;

although, in our present culture, such a Biblical teaching would most likely be strongly opposed by many people.

Nevertheless, it is true, and therefore men have the highest responsibility before God to not sin against or take advantage of another believer in order to fulfill their own desires or to gain some sexual benefit at the expense of someone else.

The ultimate avenger of sins of this sort (cf **1Thessalonians 4:6**) is the Lord Himself, and evidently, Paul had previously warned the Thessalonians about the consequences of sinning against another believer in this way.

Read 1Thessalonians 4:7-8... God's people are not to allow or condone incest, adultery, fornication, or any sexual promiscuity, nor misogyny (having contempt for females), nor misandry (having contempt for males), or any kind of sexually motivated belief or behavior, to be used in taking advantage of another believer.

Those who disobey this teaching and willfully commit sexual immorality are not rejecting man's teaching, but that of God, who gives us the Holy Spirit so that we might live moral and holy lives, not immoral and unholy lives.

1Corinthians 6:18-20, "Flee immorality. Every *other* sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."

God's purpose in saving us out of the pagan world we live in, is to have a people of His very own who have been made holy because of Christ and set apart for the glory of God, that we might walk in a manner worthy of the calling of which we have become recipients, witnesses, and ambassadors of the gospel of salvation.

1Peter 2:9-12, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation."

Pastor Mike
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